Rick Crow, 26, has stepped up a class from hobby stock to street stock competition this season.

Crow prefers the high road

Saugus Speedway racer strives to keep clean image for young fans

By BILL SCHLOTTER
Daily News Staff Writer

CANYON COUNTRY — Saugus Speedway racer Rick Crow isn't one of the big names in auto racing.

He isn't a Richard Petty, a Mario Andretti or their like, and he doesn't pretend to be.

But he knows there are a lot of little racing fans that don't see it that way. To the kids who inhabit the Saugus Speedway bleachers Saturday nights, Crow and his cronies are kings.

Crow, 26, a lifelong Santa Clarita Valley resident, knows what's in those youngsters' hearts because he was once one of them.

"My mom said about the first place I ever went was to the races," he said.

And though none of the Saugus racers of that day were any more famous than he is now, Crow grew to idolize them.

"I thought those guys were totally awesome," he said. "I thought they were gods."

Being the recipient of such adulation carries with it a responsibility, Crow feels. And he said he is trying very hard to present a good image to his wee fans.

Crow, who is a regional manager for Home Depot stores, is wholeheartedly behind the Speedway's policy of not allowing alcoholic beverages on or near the track until after the evening's racing is over.

"If you get caught with alcohol in the pits during the race, you get kicked out," he said.

There is also a family section for fans where alcohol is not allowed.

Crow and his crew, Gerrit Cromsight and Wayne Kraft, have made it a policy not to drink after the races either.

That, after all, is when the kids get to come into the pits seeking a close-up look at their idols and their machines.

And it just doesn't seem right to be signing autographs with a pen in one hand and a beer in the other.

"If you're down in the pits all drunk up, it just creates a bad atmosphere for families," Crow said.

Crow said it is unlikely racing will ever make as strong a statement against alcohol and tobacco as he would like. The sport is heavily supported by beer and tobacco companies.

But as an individual racer, he is free to choose whose sponsorship he accepts. And he rejects anything to do with alcohol, tobacco or drugs.

"I'll never put anything (sponsors' advertisements) on my car that has to do with any of that stuff," he said.

Crow has been racing for three years, and stepped up a class from hobby stock to street stock competition this season. And he's doing pretty well for a street-stock rookie.

Entering Saturday's events, he was eighth in his class for the season and his '69 Chevelle had posted the fastest qualifying time seven weeks in a row.

And on July 29, he broke a 2½-year-old track record, rounding the oval in 18.54 seconds, .08 seconds faster than the old mark.

Crow is pleased with his showing.

"If we can just pull out rookie of the year, it will be a real successful season for us," he said.

"I'd like to make a (NASCAR) Southwest Tour," he said. "But I think anything beyond that isn't very realistic."

No matter. From Crow's perspective, his true opportunities for success lie in other areas of his life, areas that involve his family, his job and his contribution to the world.

"Success isn't having a lot of money and using drugs," he said. "That's how some of these kids see success, and it's ridiculous. Success is being a good person." That's what Crow hopes he can show kids through his demeanor on the race track.

Crow estimates that as many as half of an average crowd of 3,800 at the speedway on any given night is kids.

"That's a lot of kids, when you think about it," he said.

"Hopefully, I'm helping some people not get into drugs or alcohol," Crow said. "And not end up dying somewhere on the street."